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Out for the Count:

The Last Alternative State High School in New Zealand

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Abstract

This thesis is based on a five-year case study of Auckland Metropolitan College ("Metro"), the only state-funded alternative secondary school in New Zealand. At the time of writing in September 2001, the school teeters on the brink of closure after the eighth negative Education Review Office (ERO) report in eight years.

Metro appears to exemplify many neo-liberal principles in education – choice, freedom, life-long learning, and flexibility – which are considered integral to the "effective school". However its position as a sink (and market safety valve) for unwanted students from other schools, as well as its long history without any official clarification of its status as alternative within the New Zealand education system, positions the school as a danger at the margins of mainstream schooling.

Metro's apparent inability to function "properly" within a framework that includes notions of the "good (professional) teacher", the "good (enterprising) student", and the "good (effective) school" is examined against a number of current neo-liberal educational discourses and concepts including teacher professionalism, classroom management, school effectiveness, the exercise of "proper" consumer choice, and the market place of "at risk" students.

The thesis re-situates the site of struggles away from the school, teachers, students and/or ERO per se, moving the focus to the narratives of the teachers, students, and ERO. A "post-structural ethnography" is built by combining some aspects of traditional ethnographic methodology with post-structural questions about meaning and historical specificity, moving beyond the ethnographic imperative of getting to the "real story" (Britzman 1995) into a new role of "making the familiar strange rather than the strange familiar" (Van Maanen 1995: 20). In particular Foucault's work on governmental power relations is used as an account of liberalism and neo-liberalism to problematise the current discursive framework in New Zealand education. The framework is explored as a "tricky combination in the same political structures of individualisation techniques and of totalisation procedures" (Foucault 1982: 213) and shows how Metro is inevitably a failing school.

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